

## Regional Polarization and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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I have been asked to assess the impact of the Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry upon the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Before offering my assessment, I'd like to note that in 2018 it is very difficult to examine this question in isolation from other forms of regional and international polarization that have emerged in the Middle East in recent years. This is not least because these polarizations are often at some level related. I'm thinking in particular of the GCC Crisis pitting KSA, UAE and several other Arab governments against Qatar; the regional tug of war between KSA, Iran, and Turkey; and the various dimensions of the Syria conflict. But there are also others.

With this in mind I would identify the following as the main repercussions of the ongoing regional polarization upon the Arab-Israeli conflict:

1. **Diversion of Arab and regional priorities:** It is a common assumption that Arab and regional governments pay only lip service to the Palestinian cause and would like nothing better than to be rid of it. While this observation is based on more than an element of truth, it has nevertheless also been the case that Palestine traditionally stood above regional rivalries, and was perhaps the only issue on which its squabbling regimes and governments were united. If only at the rhetorical level, and often beyond, rival powers traditionally competed in displays of commitment to the Palestinian cause. Think, for example, of Saudi King Faisal and Gamal Abdel-Nasser of Egypt, or the rivalry between Syria and Iraq's competing Baathist regimes. This had important consequences that transcended the symbolic, particularly in the international arena. Foreign powers felt the need to take Arab interests and responses into account when formulating policies towards the Arab-Israeli conflict; others, like Japan and South Korea, largely adhered to the Arab commercial boycott of Israel; and weaker states were wary of establishing even diplomatic relations with Israel. It is often forgotten that during the 1970s and 1980s Israel was for all intents and purposes a pariah state. It was on the basis of this perceived Arab unity on Palestine that the EU in 1980 adopted the Venice

declaration recognizing Palestinian rights, and the international community came to define the Palestinians as a people with a right to self-determination rather than a refugee problem in search of a humanitarian solution. There were of course other dynamics at work as well, but that is no less true today.

Turning to the present, I would argue that there has been a systematic and to some degree effective campaign, led by Saudi Arabia and its partners, to define Iran rather than Israel as the existential threat to Arab rights and interests. In the context of the conflict between Israel and Iran, and of Israel's military and security capabilities, the corollary of this doctrine is that Israel is a valuable partner in the struggle against the Iranian threat, and its continued occupation of Palestinian and Arab territory at most a secondary issue. Thanks to this transformation, the Jewish state has become a leading Sunni power, and in fact regularly engages in sectarian agitation. I would go further and argue that it is the pernicious sectarian agitation emanating from this rivalry, and its capacity to spawn endless conflict, that forms the single greatest threat to the prospect of effective Arab and regional support to the Palestinian people.

By the same token, Iran's championing of the Palestinian cause since 1979 and sponsorship of various Palestinian militant groups, has led some in the region to see the Palestinian struggle for freedom as an extension of an Iranian rather than Arab or joint project, and significantly reduced their appetite for supporting the Palestinians. Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, and his mentor the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Muhammad bin Zayed, are the clearest expressions of this trend.

- 2. Unprecedented Normalization with Israel:** While also a phenomenon that reflects multiple dynamics, the growing web of relationships between Israel and the GCC states, some overt and some more covert, reflects the adage popular among the region's ruling circles that the road to Washington goes through Tel Aviv. In other words, those seeking to strengthen their alliance with the United States, and ensure greater American commitment to their thrones and/or rivalry with Iran, believe that they would do well to expand their relations with Israel. This has been even more true during the ongoing GCC crisis, in which Qatar has hosted a veritable Who's Who of the Israel lobby from the United States, and the UAE's Washington Embassy has become an important partner

of, among others, the rabidly pro-Israel Foundation for the Defense of Democracies.

Complementing this normalization, and seeking yet further American favor, we have witnessed growing Arab pressure on the Palestinian leadership to indulge various American diplomatic proposals that are functionally indistinguishable from Israel's agenda and in a previous era would have been rejected out of hand. By thus encouraging the United States to continue promulgating unrealistic if not stillborn proposals, and empowering Israel to accelerate rather than reverse the colonization of the occupied territories, the search for Israeli-Palestinian peace is further complicated.

Once the relevant memoirs are published and the diplomatic records unsealed, I am confident we will learn that Muhammad bin Salman did assure Jared Kushner, who Nikki Haley recently proclaimed a twenty-first century Metternich waiting to be discovered, that the US recognition of exclusive Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem, and subsequent relocation of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to the Holy City, would not complicate his purported peace initiative. And there are many other examples.

- 3. Exacerbation of Inter-Palestinian Divisions:** As Iran and its Arab rivals collect proxies across the region, the various Palestinian factions have been encouraged and often pressured to take sides, and thus became enmeshed in rival coalitions rather than standing above them and seeking to mediate their resolution. To give one example, Palestinian Islamic Jihad was in 2015 told by Iran to come out openly against the Saudi-led war against Yemen. When it demurred on the grounds that it preferred neutrality in inter-Arab disputes, Tehran made its displeasure known by substantially reducing its assistance and sponsoring the establishment of a rival faction. Iran had previously all but severed its relations with Hamas when the latter's leadership departed from Damascus to Doha in response to the Syrian government's wholesale repression of the uprising in that country.

The Palestinian schism was of course not created by Saudi Arabia and Iran, or at least not primarily so. But during the past decade, when Palestinians have required national reconciliation as their most urgent priority, Riyadh and Tehran have repeatedly blocked their Palestinian proteges from either concluding agreements, or implementing those that have been reached. Thus Saudi Arabia has in practice adopted the position that it will oppose any inter-Palestinian reconciliation that does not include a renunciation by Hamas of its repaired relationship with

Iran. The UAE has gone one step further, actively promoting a return of disgraced Palestinian warlord Muhammad Dahlan to a central role within Fatah and the Palestinian Authority.

Those interested in a genuine Israeli-Palestinian peace as opposed to the charade we have been witnessing since 1993, have uniformly concluded that a unified and credible Palestinian national movement is a vital ingredient for such a process. So here once again we see the negative impact of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry upon the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In conclusion, it is in my view both fair and accurate to state that regional polarization, particularly in its present forms, has been nothing less than catastrophic for the prospects of a just and durable Israeli-Palestinian peace. Yet I take issue with the conventional wisdom that the reason this is so is because Iran is sponsoring militant Palestinian organizations in order to gain advantage over Saudi Arabia and prepare for an eventual conflict with Israel. Iran is sponsoring militant Palestinian organizations. Iran is seeking to gain advantage over Saudi Arabia. And Iran is preparing for conflict with Israel. But the core obstacle to Israeli-Palestinian peace has been and remains the longest military occupation in the world today, and the active obstruction of Palestinian self-determination. As I have tried to illustrate, the most destructive effect of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, and indeed of other forms of regional polarization, is that it has re-inforced inter-Palestinian division; deprived the Palestinians of the unified support and strategic depth they require for a successful strategy; empowered Israel to consolidate its domination of the Palestinian people; and encouraged the international community, particularly the United State and Europe, to perpetuate the status quo.

It would of course be simplistic to conclude that the polarization being discussed today explains the current state of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But it does help explain it, and does so in ways that are not always readily apparent.

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